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The Asian American Nexus to Civil Rights

Angelo Ancheta, Jacinta Ma,
and Don Nakanishi

When the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the use of race-conscious admissions policies in the recent University of Michigan affirmative action cases, the majority of opinions did not mention Asian Americans. Indeed, Asian Americans were not included as part of the University's undergraduate admissions policy that granted additional points to underrepresented minority applicants. But Asian Americans were not absent from the Supreme Court's decision-making. The Court received two friend-of-the-court briefs from Asian American organizations: One brief, filed by a single organization, argued against race-conscious admissions because of past discrimination against Asian Americans and because of the harms that affirmative action might impose on Asian Americans. The other brief, filed by a coalition of national and local organizations, argued that Asian Americans continue to suffer discrimination and do, in fact, benefit from affirmative action; they also argued that as a matter of principle, not simply self-interest, race-conscious policies are necessary to advance diversity and equal educational opportunity.

The divergence of Asian American perspectives in the Michigan cases, the omission of Asian Americans from the University's undergraduate policy—typical of the admissions policies at many selective colleges and universities—as well as the Supreme Court's silence on the question of Asian Americans and the “model minority” myth all exemplify the complexity of Asian American interests and civil rights advocacy. How should past and present discrimination against Asian Americans be considered in race-conscious policymaking? Are Asian Americans over-represented in some institutions and properly excluded from affirmation action programs? Should some underrepresented Asian American populations, such as Southeast Asians and Filipinos, but not others be

counted in race-conscious admissions policies? Should Asian American positions always align with other minority group positions? Can any one individual or group speak on behalf of *all* Asian Americans?

Developing—and sustaining—an Asian American civil rights agenda has always been a challenge. Many key issues have unified Asian American communities through the advancement of racial justice: addressing overt discrimination such as hate violence, racial profiling, and anti-Asian media treatment; confronting problems like the “model minority” myth and the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype; combating public policies with adverse effects on major sectors of the Asian American population, such as exclusionary immigration and naturalization policies, citizens-only restrictions, and denials of language rights.

At the same time, core civil rights issues such as voting rights, redistricting, and equal educational access often illuminate conflicting political and economic interests among Asian Americans. Especially controversial issues such as affirmative action and the treatment of undocumented immigrants are even more telling, revealing significant tensions both within Asian American communities and between Asian Americans and other communities of color. Immigration has fueled population growth and led to greater visibility for Asian Americans, but the evolving demography has also complicated the civil rights landscape. Diversity, along a variety of dimensions—ethnicity, generation, and socioeconomic class are just a few—can be a source of both strength and discord.

Yet, even with the growth of Asian American populations, the near-invisibility of Asian American perspectives in mainstream public policy making, policy research and teaching, philanthropy, and even civil rights activism remains a troubling and persistent problem. Asian Americans are frequently absent from the largely black-white civil rights discourse, and if they are considered, they are often relegated to secondary or tertiary roles. Major components of the Asian American civil rights agenda are ignored altogether.

As public values and priorities shift in the post-9/11 environment, and racial profiling and anti-immigrant policies gain increasing public support, the challenges to implementing the Asian American civil rights agenda are as daunting as ever. Linking the realms

of advocacy, research, and policy has never been more pressing in the ongoing defense and advancement of Asian American civil rights.

Most of the essays and articles in this special issue of *AAPI Nexus* were originally produced for a strategic roundtable held in October 2002 and sponsored by The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. The two-day roundtable at Harvard drew participants from the worlds of both academia and advocacy with the goals of exploring common objectives to address racial justice for Asian Americans, illuminating new problems and issues, and grappling with the many challenges facing Asian American communities in the post-9/11 world.

All of the pieces in this issue thus focus on the complexities of the Asian American civil rights agenda addressed at the roundtable: the necessity of bridging the gaps between activists and scholars to strengthen civil rights advocacy and civil rights research, the limits of pan-Asian frameworks in addressing the needs of specific populations, the problems in developing effective coalitions both within Asian American communities and between Asian Americans and other minority communities, and the changing demography that has shaped and reshaped Asian American civil rights.

The Practitioner's Essay by Karen Narasaki and June K. Han highlights the civil rights issues that have come to dominate America's post-9/11 environment, including anti-Asian violence, racial profiling, abridgments of immigrants' rights, restrictive immigration policies, employment discrimination, denials of language rights, and unequal access to the justice system. In doing so, Narasaki and Han illuminate critical and longstanding gaps that exist between advocates working on these key issues and researchers focusing on Asian American communities. But as Narasaki and Han stress, the gaps between advocacy and research can and must be bridged: "In this post-9/11 era of shrinking resources, a higher level of dialogue between research institutions and community-based organizations will be critical. Now more than ever, a pooling of ideas and resources through partnerships and collaborative efforts will have an important and lasting impact."

Claire Jean Kim's article addresses the challenges that come with developing cross-racial collaborations and coalitions between

Asian Americans and other minority communities. Kim tests the “people of color” construct by exploring the ambiguity of Asian American political identity, the effects of this ambiguity on Asian American alliances with Blacks and Latinos, and the successes and failures of two Asian American community organizations—the Korean Immigrant Workers Association in Los Angeles and CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities in New York City—that have engaged in cross-racial alliances. She concludes that the development of Asian American political identity must inevitably involve dialogue and debate within the Asian American community, a dynamic process that cuts across both ideological and organizational lines.

Peter Kiang’s article focuses on the theme of ethnic diversity within the Asian American population by closely examining educational equity issues affecting Southeast Asian American communities, both nationally and in Massachusetts. Kiang argues that the experiences of Southeast Asian Americans, who are among the country’s most economically disadvantaged Asian Americans, are easily neglected or ignored in pan-Asian civil rights frameworks, leading to profound ethical issues and to potential harms in Southeast Asian American communities. Yet, as Kiang also demonstrates, local and national organizing, advocacy, and leadership development on behalf of these communities has made a significant difference in improving educational outcomes and the lives of many Southeast Asian American students. He concludes that the lessons learned from these specific efforts on behalf of Southeast Asian Americans have important implications for developing more effective and inclusive strategies of pan-Asian civil rights advocacy.

Rowena Robles’ article focuses on the controversial *Ho v. San Francisco Unified School District* litigation to illustrate some of the legal, political, and rhetorical conflicts within Asian American communities. The *Ho* lawsuit, initiated by Chinese American parents during the 1990s to challenge admissions policies at San Francisco’s Lowell High School and to overturn a longstanding desegregation court order, illustrates the divergent interests that can arise within an Asian American community, as well as between Asian Americans and other minority groups. Robles’ analysis of neo-conservative rhetoric and advocacy suggests that segments of the Asian American community can themselves play a major role in rein-

forcing the “model minority” stereotype, even while attempting to present claims of racial or ethnic discrimination.

Paul Ong’s analysis in the Almanac section analyzes the demographic trends and patterns that have influenced the growth of Asian American populations and the nature of Asian American civil rights. Examining a variety of data, including data from the 2000 Census and various social and economic indicators, Ong discusses recent trends in migration, population growth, education, segregation, and other key areas to illustrate the complexity of Asian American civil rights issues. He highlights the centrality of immigration, ethnic diversity, and English language ability in shaping the civil rights agenda of Asian Americans and argues for a more nuanced and accommodating view of civil rights that moves beyond race alone.

All of the articles demonstrate that the Asian American civil rights agenda is dynamic and evolving—it is an agenda replete with many items, both old and new, that are unfinished and frequently unaddressed. Yet, as all of the authors make clear, the goal of achieving racial justice and racial equality that so animated the civil rights struggles of the past remains a source of optimism for advocates and researchers of civil rights, even as the challenges to Asian American civil rights continue to become more complex.

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